

Local dancers step to annual 'Nutcracker' tradition

As common as holiday songs, shopping and anticipation of snow are the annual productions of the "Nutcracker" ballet, and performances of Handel's Messiah.

Professional, community and student dance companies all participate in the perennial tradition.

The following is a list of current and upcoming productions "The Nutcracker."

■ **"The Harlem Nutcracker,"** choreographed by Donald Byrd — 3 & 7 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 5, Detroit Opera House, Madison Avenue at Broadway, Detroit. (800) 221-1229

■ **"Michigan Ballet Theatre** with guests from American Ballet Theatre — 2 & 7 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 5, Lake Orion High School Center for the Performing Arts, 455 East Scripps Road, Lake Orion. (248) 662-3117

■ **Michigan Classic Ballet** — 3 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 5, Mary Auditorium, Farmington Hills. (248) 334-6964

■ **Detroit Symphony Orchestra**

with Ballet Internationale Thursday, Dec. 9 to Sunday, Dec. 19, at the Detroit Opera House, 1526 Broadway. (313) 576-5111/(313) 874-SING.

■ **Contemporary Civic Ballet** — 3:30 p.m. Saturday & Sunday, Dec. 11-12, featuring local dancers from tri-county area, and New York City ballet soloist Arch Higgins. Kimball High School Auditorium, east of Crooks, north of 13 Mile Road, Royal Oak. (248) 641-8063.

■ **Livonia Civic Ballet**, 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 11 and 2 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 12, at the Clarenceville High School Auditorium, 20155 Middlebelt Road, Livonia. \$13, \$10 seniors/students, \$8 ages 5-9. (734) 427-9103.

■ **Livonia Symphony Orchestra** with Dearborn Ballet Theatre, 7 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 11 at Church Hill High School, 8900 Newburgh, north of Joy Road, Livonia. \$15, \$10 students/children. (734) 421-1111/(734) 464-2741.

■ **Plymouth Symphony Orchestra** with Plymouth Can-

ton Ballet Company, 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 11, and 3 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 12, at Plymouth Salem High School Auditorium, 46181 Joy Road and Canton Center, Canton. \$17 adults/seniors, \$10 students K-12, and \$5 Sugar Plum Teas that follow Saturday-Sunday matinees. (734) 451-2112.

The following is a list of current performances of Handel's Messiah.

■ **Fort Street Chorale** — 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 5 at Fort Street Presbyterian Church, 631 W. Fort St., Detroit. (313) 961-4533.

■ **The UMS Choral Union** performs 2 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 5 at Hill Auditorium, 825 North University Ave., Ann Arbor. (734) 764-2538.

■ **The Detroit Symphony Orchestra** with the University of Michigan Chamber Choir and select vocalists — 3 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, Dec. 4-5, Orchestra Hall, 3711 Woodward Ave., Detroit. Tickets \$15 to \$68, call (313) 576-5111.



Variation: Choreographer Donald Byrd has transformed the holiday ballet classic into a celebration of African-American culture, featuring Duke Ellington's arrangement of Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Suite.

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anyway and the chance to play Barbra Streisand and Tiny Annie, whom she recreates for this show, along with Doris Day, Mary Martin as Peter Pan, Judy Garland, Liza Minnelli, Kathie Lee and Pokemon — that round, huggable barrel of yellow felt and foam, Pikachu.

Got bless you everyone.

Favorite character

"Tiny Annie is my favorite character because she's so ridiculous. I'm shameless," said Willinger. "Usually as an actress, you have to be truthful, honest and in the moment, but here, I make it broad and over-the-top."

"Sometimes, when I come off stage after being Pokemon or

Tiny Annie, I joke to myself, 'I'm so glad I went to graduate school for this.' But it's truly a lot of fun. It's a great exercise in concentration."

Super-quick costume and character changes (more than 15) could cause deja vu for Willinger, who learned to appreciate the miracle of Velero when she opened the Gem season in "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change" in its new location at 333 Madison Avenue.

When Willinger first performed in "Forbidden Broadway," it was at the original Gem location at 62 East Columbia. In October of 1997, the Gem Theatre embarked on a five-and-a-half-block move which resulted

in being entered in the Guinness Book of World Records as "the heaviest building moved on wheels."

"Was it weird performing in the same theater but a different location?"

"At first it was bizarre," Willinger remembers. "I kept heading for the dressing room, but ended up at the wall. There was no door where there used to be doors."

Understudy

Performing at the Gem has opened new doors for Eric Gutman who, along with his parents, Howard and Karen Gutman, petitioned to bring back the dormant musical theater program

at Harrison High School in Farmington when Gutman was a student there. After graduating with a bachelor of fine arts degree in musical theater performance from Western Michigan University in April 1999, Gutman was all packed and ready to do summer stock in Indiana before relocating to Chicago. Then he got the call from a friend who had recommended Gutman for an understudy role in "Forbidden Hollywood."

"My whole life got flipped upside down in a matter of six days," recalls Gutman, who turned 22 on Nov. 23. "I graduated on April 24, 1999, saw 'Forbidden Hollywood' on the 28th and got hired on the 30th."

As the understudy in "Forbidden Hollywood" and "Forbidden Christmas," Gutman covers for both male roles currently played by Lance Roberts of Los Angeles and Kevin McGlynn of New York) and gets to play Whoopi Goldberg, Frank Sinatra, Louis Armstrong and even Teyte from "Fiddler on the Roof" who longed to get into the Christmas act by singing "If I Were a Gentile" (a role that the nice Jewish Gutman is sure to have down pat).

Though he's already gone on 42 times, Gutman is required by contract to watch the show two times a week and be on call.

Have cell phone, pager and home phone, will travel. As should you, straight to "Forbidden Christmas." Bah humbug.

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Saturday, Dec. 4, 8:00 p.m.
Sunday, Dec. 5, 4:00 p.m.
Monday, Dec. 6, 8:00 p.m.
Tuesday, Dec. 7, 8:00 p.m.
Wednesday, Dec. 8, 8:00 p.m.
Thursday, Dec. 9, 8:00 p.m.
Friday, Dec. 10, 8:00 p.m.
Saturday, Dec. 11, 8:00 p.m.
Sunday, Dec. 12, 4:00 p.m.
Monday, Dec. 13, 8:00 p.m.

Friday, Dec. 17, 8:00 p.m.
Saturday, Dec. 18, 8:00 p.m.
Sunday, Dec. 19, 4:00 p.m.
Monday, Dec. 20, 8:00 p.m.
Tuesday, Dec. 21, 8:00 p.m.
Wednesday, Dec. 22, 8:00 p.m.
Thursday, Dec. 23, 8:00 p.m.
Friday, Dec. 24, 8:00 p.m.
Saturday, Dec. 25, 4:00 p.m.
Sunday, Dec. 26, 8:00 p.m.

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The 29th annual fair takes place 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 11, and 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 12 at Oakland Community College, Building H, Farmington Hills. (734) 662-3382.

BIRMINGHAM BLOOMFIELD ART CENTER

Weekends of special holiday sales. The "Small Works" fine art sale runs through Thursday, December 30 in the DeSalle Community Gallery with more than 200 works priced under \$300. The pottery sale is Thursday to Saturday, Dec. 9 to 11. Hours are Monday to Thursday 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., Friday and Saturday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sundays, noon to 4 p.m. In December, 1516 South Cranbrook Road, Birmingham. (248) 644-0866.

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NATIVE WEST

The 10th annual art & jewelry festival is Sunday, Dec. 5 at 563 W. Ann Arbor Trail, Plymouth. (734) 435-8838.